

Measuring rural and urban consciousness in Europe[☆]

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ABSTRACT

A rural consciousness, encompassing a rural identity and resentments directed at urban areas and the political elite, has emerged as a key explanation for the growing rural–urban political divides affecting many Western democracies. However, existing research has largely focused on the case of the United States; there is also no consensus as to the structure or dimensionality of rural (and urban) consciousness. In response, this paper develops and tests a battery of 16 items for measuring consciousness in five Western European countries: Britain, France, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland. We show that both rural and urban consciousness are best understood as comprising a dimension of identity and three dimensions of resentment pertaining to power, resources, and culture, in line with Cramer's original conceptualization. We furthermore find that rural consciousness in Western Europe is generally associated with indicators of “left behind” status such as low income and lack of a university education and is also associated with identification with the political right. This shows how rural–urban identities and resentments can help illuminate the changing political landscape of Western Europe.

1. Introduction

There has long been a political and social divide between the urban centers and the rural hinterlands of Europe (e.g., Caramani, 2004; Rokkan, 1970). In recent years, these rural–urban divides appear to have deepened, with ruralites showing greater support for conservative (Huijsmans and Rodden, 2024) and authoritarian-populist parties (Brookes and Cappellina, 2023; Maxwell, 2019; Scoones et al., 2018; Strijker et al., 2015), higher levels of cultural conservatism (Huijsmans et al., 2021), and lower political efficacy (del Horno et al., 2023), trust (Zumbrunn, 2024), satisfaction with (Kenny and Luca,

2021; Lago, 2021) and support for democracy (Zumbrunn and Freitag, 2023). In light of this converging evidence, some scholars argue that rural–urban divides currently pose a threat to the stability of democracy (Mettler and Brown, 2022).

In an effort to better understand these apparently growing divides, researchers have turned to the political psychology of place. Following the work of Cramer (2012, 2016), studies have conceptualized and measured the place-based identities and resentments that together constitute the “consciousness” of rural or urban residence (Borwein and Lucas, 2023; Hegewald, 2024; Munis, 2022; Trujillo, 2022; Trujillo and

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Table 1
Questions used to measure place-based identities.

Label	Wording
IdDescrip	The term [ingroup] resident is a good description of how I see myself.
IdImport	Being a/an [ingroup] resident is very important to me.
IdConnect	When I meet people who live in [ingroup] areas, I feel connected.
IdValues	I have similar values to other people living in [ingroup] areas.
IdCommon	I have a lot in common with other people living in [ingroup] areas.

The response set is (1) strongly agree, (2) somewhat agree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) somewhat disagree, and (5) strongly disagree. In the analysis that follows we reverse the order of these such that higher values represent stronger identity. In the questions, “ingroup” and “outgroup” are replaced with “urban” for rural residents and “rural” for urban residents.

(Crowley, 2022). As the rapidly accumulating literature indicates, the concepts of rural and urban consciousness have the potential to be a powerful lens for understanding spatial patterns in political attitudes and behavior.

Yet important questions remain regarding the measurement of rural and urban consciousness. First, existing research has largely focused on the case of the United States, with only Hegewald (2024) using data gathered in Europe and using a comparative design.¹ Given the differences between the United States and Europe, not to mention the differences within European states, we should be cautious in assuming that the concepts of rural and urban consciousness generalize from the US to Europe.

Second, there is no consensus as to whether the resentment component of consciousness is best conceptualized as a single dimension of opinion (Borwein and Lucas, 2023; Hegewald, 2024; Munis, 2022) or three distinct dimensions of economic, political, and cultural resentment as originally proposed by Cramer (2016) and supported by Trujillo and Crowley’s (2022) analysis. Indeed, the only existing study of rural and urban consciousness in Europe (Hegewald, 2024) uses a five-item battery that is too brief to allow the dimensionality of the underlying opinions to be adequately tested.

This paper addresses these issues by developing and testing an extensive 16-item survey battery for measuring rural and urban consciousness in Europe, including 11 items devoted to resentment and five to identity. We test our battery in five distinct European locales (using five languages): Britain, France, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland. We find that, in all cases, rural and urban resentment is not unidimensional but, is instead best characterized as having the three components of power, resource, and cultural resentment first identified by Cramer (2016).

We moreover find variation in the connections between the three types of resentment – power, resource, and cultural – and ideological identities across urban and rural residence and country. In Switzerland and France, rural populations exhibit a strong correlation between all three forms of resentment and right-wing political leanings, a trend not observed among urban populations. Conversely, in Germany, both rural and urban residents show an association between power and resource resentment and right-wing ideology, while cultural resentment is correlated with right-wing ideology only among rural residents. In Britain, the only connection observed between resentment and ideology is for cultural resentment among ruralites, while in Spain, it is urbanites who show associations between all three resentment types and right-wing ideology, with no such links being discernible for ruralites. As these patterns suggest, our measures of rural and urban consciousness can not only help researchers measure place-based consciousness, they can help illuminate the shifting political cleavages in Western Europe (Ford and Jennings, 2020).

¹ de Lange et al. (2023) and Huijsmans (2023) examine the related – albeit distinct – issue of regional resentment and consciousness within the Netherlands.

2. Existing research on rural–urban consciousness

In Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) classic account, the rural–urban divide is one of the fundamental political “cleavages” in Western democracies. It arose from the national and industrial revolutions that transformed European societies, but, over the twentieth century, it faded in prominence as other divides (notably around class) took precedence in the political realm.

In recent years, however, rural–urban political divides have risen in importance again. In the United States, several studies have demonstrated rural–urban differences in vote choice and partisanship (Huijsmans and Rodden, 2024; Gimpel et al., 2020; Rodden, 2019; Scala and Johnson, 2017). In Europe, rural (vs. urban) residence has been shown to have even wider political consequences including: greater support for radical right populists (Fitzgerald and Lawrence, 2011; Gavenda and Umit, 2016; Maxwell, 2019; Scoones et al., 2018; Strijker et al., 2015); more hostility to immigration (Huijsmans et al., 2021; Maxwell, 2020); and less trust in politics and democratic institutions (Kenny and Luca, 2021; Lago, 2021; Mitsch et al., 2021; Zumbrunn and Freitag, 2023). It is clear that the rural–urban divide is once again a major cleavage in Western democracies.

Three mechanisms have been proposed for how rural vs. urban residence produces divides in political behavior and public opinion. First is the differing demographic composition of rural and urban areas (Maxwell, 2019). As Western societies have become more mobile, economic, cultural, and employment factors have led to a greater divergence between those choosing to live in metropolitan, suburban, and rural areas (Carlson and Gimpel, 2019; Cho et al., 2013; Jokela, 2022). Cities attracted more highly educated people whilst rural areas generally experienced an outward migration of younger people, leaving rural areas older and less diverse (Jennings and Stoker, 2016; Ford and Jennings, 2020; Scala and Johnson, 2017).

Second, and presented as something of a foil to these compositional explanations, are accounts of how rural and urban places differ because of the different experiences encountered by their residents. For example, rural areas are less densely-populated than urban areas, which makes it less cost-effective for a wide variety of goods and services to be provided in rural compared with urban areas (Gimpel et al., 2020). A scarcity of resources, whether provided by private enterprises or governments, thus characterizes many rural areas, which, in turn, shapes political preferences and behavior (e.g., Coquard, 2019; Stroppe, 2023).

A third mechanism, place-based “consciousness” has also been proposed for why the rural–urban cleavage shapes political outcomes (Cramer Walsh, 2012; Cramer, 2016). For Cramer, rural consciousness encompasses both an identity as a ruralite and an accompanying sense of resentment towards both urban areas and urbanites. Cramer delineates three particular varieties of resentment: “a perception that rural areas do not receive their fair share of decision-making power, that they are distinct from urban (and suburban) areas in their culture and lifestyle (and that these differences are not respected), and that rural areas do not receive their fair share of public resources” (Cramer, 2016, 23).

The concept of place-based consciousness builds on social identity theory's (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) delineation of three processes of identity formation: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison (Ellemers and Haslam, 2012). As Trujillo and Crowley (2022) and Zumbrunn (2024) argue, the development of place-based identities is a product of the first two processes, where individuals categorize themselves into a social group (e.g., rural or urban) and develop identification with that group. These steps focus inwardly on the in-group. Place-based resentment, by contrast, stems from the third process – social comparison – where individuals compare their in-group relative to out-groups (e.g., rural versus urban residents). This final process of comparison may lead to grievances and resentments when people perceive their group (or place) is negatively valued or disadvantaged (Zumbrunn, 2024).

Munis (2022) was the first to operationalize and measure rural consciousness, developing a 13-item battery fielded in a nationally representative survey of US residents. While focusing solely on the resentment component of consciousness, Munis otherwise adheres to Cramer's framework by measuring the power, resources, and cultural dimensions of rural resentment. After dropping three items, the remaining items demonstrate good psychometric properties, including internal consistency and discriminant validity. Expanding beyond Cramer's rural focus, Munis applies the battery to both rural and urban residents, but finds that place-based consciousness is highest among ruralites.

Subsequent studies have further developed and extended the work of Cramer and Munis. Trujillo (2022) shows that rural identity – but not urban identity or even rural residence – is related to anti-intellectualism. In perhaps the most comprehensive treatment of the concept of place-based resentment, Trujillo and Crowley (2022) develop a 14-item battery following pilot testing of a 53-item battery. They argue that the symbolic aspects of resentment (i.e., power and cultural resentment) are positively linked with Trump support while material aspects (i.e., resource resentment) show a negative relationship. Borwein and Lucas (2023) extend this line of work outside the United States, to Canada, deploying a survey-based measure of resentment that covers the three components identified by Cramer, i.e., cultural, power, and resource resentments. Hegewald (2024) measures rural and urban consciousness in Europe, fielding a set of five resentment items in a nine national samples. He finds that ruralites show higher trust in local (rather than national) institutions to the extent that they are resentful.

Despite this convergence on the concept of rural consciousness as expounded by Cramer Walsh (2012) (and its analogue, urban consciousness, first proposed by Munis (2022)), important differences remain in how consciousness has been operationalized and measured. First, while Cramer (2016), Trujillo (2022), Trujillo and Crowley (2022) include identity as a component of consciousness, Munis (2022), Borwein and Lucas (2023), and Hegewald (2024) omit it.

Second, there are disagreements regarding the structure of resentment itself, i.e., whether it is characterized by three distinct (but potentially correlated) components corresponding to cultural, power, and resource resentments, or whether these essentially cohere into a single dimension of resentment. Cramer is in fact somewhat ambiguous on this issue: at times suggesting that resentment is a coherent concept that is expressed in three different ways; at other times stating that the resource, power, and cultural forms of resentment are different components. Later, survey-based work arrives at different conclusions. Trujillo and Crowley (2022) argue that resentments are best characterized as three-dimensional.² Munis (2022), in contrast, finds resentment to be unidimensional. Borwein and Lucas (2023) and Hegewald (2024) have shorter batteries, of four and five items respectively, so are unable

² Trujillo and Crowley (2022) recommend that scholars adopt a two-dimensional, symbolic vs. material conceptualization even though their findings arguably support a three-dimensional solution.

to test the dimensionality in any meaningful way. Borwein and Lucas (2023) assumes unidimensionality, while Hegewald (2024) uses both unidimensional and three-dimensional operationalizations.

In sum, political scientists have recently begun examining the psychological aspects of the rural–urban divide. Cramer's (2016) landmark work developed the contours of the concept of rural consciousness, which encompasses both place-based identities and resentments. This conceptualization has been translated into survey research batteries and tested in various ways by several authors (Borwein and Lucas, 2023; Munis, 2022; Trujillo, 2022; Trujillo and Crowley, 2022; Hegewald, 2024). These studies generally find place-based consciousness to be a powerful lens for understanding the link between rurality (especially) and political grievances. However, there is no agreement as to how the various forms of resentment cohere, e.g., whether resentment is best characterized as a single variable or treated as three distinct variables. Moreover, while Hegewald (2024) has taken initial steps with a short battery, the measurement of rural and urban consciousness in Europe remains largely unexplored by researchers. We describe our approach to measuring rural and urban consciousness in Europe in the next section.

3. Our approach to measuring rural–urban consciousness

Unlike previous measures developed for North American contexts (Borwein and Lucas, 2023; Munis, 2022; Trujillo, 2022; Trujillo and Crowley, 2022), we sought to develop questions for European contexts; specifically, Britain, France, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland. In addition, in contrast to existing batteries that focus exclusively on resentment (e.g., Borwein and Lucas, 2023; Hegewald, 2024; Munis, 2022), we aim (like Trujillo 2022) to measure both identity and resentments, thereby aligning more closely with Cramer's (2016) conceptual framework. Finally, unlike the brief five-item battery used by Hegewald (2024), we require multiple items per latent construct to test the validity and reliability of our measures.

We begin by asking respondents to assess the degree to which they categorize themselves as urban or rural because self-categorization as a group member is a necessary condition for group identification (e.g., Hogg and Abrams, 1988). Given the different political geographies of our five cases, the self-categorization question is asked differently across the five countries.³ In Germany, Spain, and Britain, we asked respondents:

“Would you say that you live in an urban place, a rural place, or someplace in between?”

The response set includes three urban categories, (1) “very urban”, (2) “somewhat urban” and (3) “more urban than rural”, as well as three corresponding rural categories, (4) “more rural than urban”, (5) “somewhat rural”, and (6) “very rural”. We treat responses (1) through (3) as respondents' self-categorizations as urbanites and responses (4) through (6) as respondents' self-categorizations as ruralites. In France, respondents were presented with the statement:

“I identify myself as ..”,

with respondents choosing (1) “urban” treated as urbanites, those choosing (2) “rural” treated as ruralites, and those selecting (3) “peri-urban” sorted into an intermediate category. In Switzerland, a question from the European Social Survey was applied:

³ Existing research and commentary in France and Switzerland suggested the need to measure the place-based consciousness of residents of two intermediate geographies: in France, peri-urban areas (e.g., Guilluy, 2014); in Switzerland, suburban areas (e.g., Kübler, 2023) in addition to rural and urban residents. Note that for clarity and consistency, we focus only on the two basic categories of urban and rural in our five samples throughout the rest of this paper, excluding the intermediate category.

Table 2
Questions used to measure place-based resentment.

Label	Wording
<i>Power</i>	
ResCare	Politicians do not care what people living in [ingroup] areas think.
ResElites	Elites look down on people living in [ingroup] areas.
ResNoSay	People living in [ingroup] areas have no say in what the government does.
ResMPs	There are too many MPs from [outgroup] areas who do not represent the interests of people living in [ingroup] areas.
ResIgnore	Politicians ignore the issues that really matter in [ingroup] areas.
ResMedia	[Ingroup] areas are not represented enough in the media.
<i>Resources</i>	
ResSpend	[Ingroup] areas are usually last in line for government spending on things like roads, schools and healthcare.
ResDevelop	The government spends too much money on the development of [outgroup] areas, while the development of [ingroup] areas falls by the wayside.
<i>Culture</i>	
ResRespect	People in [outgroup] areas do not respect the lifestyle of people in [ingroup] areas.
ResValues	People in [outgroup] areas have quite different values to me.
ResWork	People in [ingroup] areas work harder than people in [outgroup] areas.

The response set is (1) strongly agree, (2) somewhat agree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) somewhat disagree, and (5) strongly disagree. In the analysis that follows we reverse the order of these such that higher values represent greater resentment.

“How would you describe the place where you live?”

Respondents are treated as urbanites if they chose the response categories (1) “a big city” or (2) “town/small city” and as ruralites if response categories (4) “country village” or (5) “farm” were selected. The intermediate category was populated by respondents choosing (3) “suburbs”.⁴

Once respondents have categorized themselves as rural or urban by reporting their place of residence, we measure the strength of the corresponding identities using a battery of five questions (Table 1).⁵ These questions were developed from previous research on related concepts like national identity (Huddy and Khatib, 2007) and partisan identity (Bankert et al., 2017). In this regard, we take a similar approach to Trujillo (2022) in measuring place-based identity.

As we have discussed, resentment is more complex a variable than place-based identity. Like Trujillo and Crowley (2022) and Munis (2022), we developed questions tapping all three forms of place-based resentment described by Cramer (2016): power (i.e., relating to the quality of representation); resources (i.e., relating to distributive politics), and cultural (i.e., relating to differences in values and lack of respect). Our questions are presented in Table 2.

⁴ In the supplementary materials we compare these self-categorized places of residence with an objective measure, the Degree of Urbanization (DEGURBA) classification, to ascertain whether the different questions used in France and Switzerland had different effects. They do not: we find a similar correspondence between the subjective and objective measures across the five surveys. 1.4% of French respondents with a “rural” identity and 4.3% of Swiss respondents who describe their place of residence as “country village” or “farm” are categorized differently (i.e., as living in “cities”) in DEGURBA. This is comparable to the percentage of self-identified ruralites in the other three cases who are classified as urbanites by DEGURBA (2–4.5%). Similarly, 4.2% (French) and 0.7% (Swiss) of urbanites are categorized as living in “rural areas” using the DEGURBA method, compared with between 1.7 and 6.2% in the other cases.

⁵ We initially started with a larger set of 22 items in our questionnaire, distributed across the four dimensions as follows: identity (6 items), power resentment (8 items), resource resentment (4 items), and cultural resentment (4 items). We conducted pre-tests in each of the five countries, and assessed the construct validity of each item by examining the factor loadings of all items. Items that exhibited weak associations, in at least one sample, with the latent construct they were designed to measure were subsequently dropped.

4. Research design

4.1. Data and case selection

The concept of rural and urban consciousness are forms of place-based consciousness, and, as such, are rooted in a person’s sense of place and the nature of that place itself. Rural and urban consciousness should therefore be influenced by local conditions, national political institutions, and historical experiences. Existing research on this topic is, however, heavily based on evidence from the United States, in which rural (or urban) areas differ considerably from those within Europe. For example, in Europe, the rural–urban cleavage was originally the result of industrialization, which precipitated a conflict of interest between the traditional agrarian elite and the emerging industrial bourgeoisie (Rokkan, 1970). In addition, the smaller size of many European states means that their rural areas are less remote than those found, e.g., in Cramer (2016). In sum, we cannot assume that concepts and measures designed for an American setting will operate well in European contexts.

Yet there are also major differences within Europe. Along with the original rural–urban cleavage, European countries vary in the extent to which alternative divides, such as religious, linguistic, and regionalist, are evident, as well as in their political institutions, which channel, dampen, or amplify any such divides (see, e.g., Caramani, 2004). Our five cases – Britain,⁶ France, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland – offer variation across all these dimensions. Britain and Germany experienced early and extensive industrialization, and therefore a more pronounced rural–urban divide. Germany and Switzerland have been shaped by religious diversity, and Spain and Switzerland by linguistic diversity. The regionalist dimension of politics is currently a significant factor in both Britain and Spain while regional differences between the formerly separate parts of Germany continue to play a major role in political life. Our cases also show variation in political institutions: France is more centralized, while Germany and Switzerland are federal; Britain and France use majoritarian electoral systems while the other three cases employ proportional systems. As such, although our five cases are not representative of Western Europe, they do vary on many of the key political variables in this region.

We fielded our surveys in the five countries between 2 September and 20 December 2022. The surveys were implemented online

⁶ We focus on Great Britain, not the United Kingdom, given the very different political context and historical experience of Northern Ireland.

Table 3
Sample characteristics and procedures.

Country	Survey firm	Type of panel	Sampling scheme	Fieldwork	N
CHE	Intervista	Opt-in online panel	Quota sample: age, region, & rural-urban	2–27 Sep.	1552
DEU	Forsa	RDD-based online panel	Quota sample: age, gender, educ., & region	18 Nov.–5 Dec	4198
ESP	Netquest	Opt-in online panel	Quota sample: age, gender, educ., & region	22 Nov.–20 Dec.	4001
FRA	OpinionWay	Opt-in online panel	Quota sample: age, gender, educ., region, & class	23 Sep.–24 Oct.	3340
GBR	YouGov	Opt-in online panel	Quota sample: rural–urban, nation, age, gender, educ., & past vote	3–19 Oct.	4069

All fieldwork dates are in 2022. RDD = random digit dialing. N includes completed interviews of respondents that were categorized as urbanite or ruralite and were asked about place-based resentments with reference to either rural or urban areas respectively.

by renowned survey companies and, using various quotas, were designed to be representative of the adult population of each country. Survey weights are used for the Swiss, German, French, and British samples to adjust for oversampled rural dwellers and to align the sample demographics with population totals. Alongside the place-based consciousness batteries, the questionnaires in all countries included a shared set of demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal questions. Table 3 offers further details broken down by country.

4.2. Empirical strategy

Our analysis of our batteries proceeds in four steps. First, we test various interpretations of the concept of rural and urban consciousness, including whether resentment is unidimensional or multidimensional (in addition to a separate identity component). That is, we examine the dimensionality of public opinion regarding rural and urban identity and resentment. Second, we test the reliability of each of our scales. Third, we describe the nature of rural and urban consciousness in Europe by examining patterns of identity and resentment across countries and socio-political indicators such as income and left-right ideology. Finally, we derive a more concise, four item battery for use when survey time is limited.

5. Results

5.1. Dimensionality

We designed our batteries using existing conceptual (Cramer, 2016) and empirical (e.g., Munis, 2022) work to measure place-based identity and resentment, with five items employed to measure the former and 11 items used to measure the latter. We expect that these design choices will be reflected in the emergent dimensionality of our data. As such, our tests of dimensionality are confirmatory, not exploratory. In addition, we seek to adjudicate between various interpretations of place-based consciousness that have been put forward, namely whether the resentment component is best specified as having one or three dimensions.

To accomplish this we fit a series of confirmatory factor analytic (CFA) models and carry out chi-square comparison tests. Since there are missing values (both refusals and “don’t know” responses) in all of our 16 items, listwise deletion would lead to a substantial number of deleted respondents (between 19 and 29 percent of respondents across the five cases). As, such, we fit our CFAs using full-information maximum likelihood (FIML), which produces unbiased parameter estimates in the presence of missing values. It also allows factor scores to be obtained for any respondent who provided at least one response.

We fit and compare four CFA models in each of the five national samples. First is a two-dimensional model with separate but potentially correlated factors for identity and resentment; second is a four-dimensional model with correlated factors for identity and power resentment, resource resentment, and cultural resentment. Third, we examine a hierarchical model that features two primary factors of identity and resentment, with the latter factor giving rise to three secondary factors of power, resource, and cultural resentment. Finally, we also compare a unidimensional model of consciousness in which identity and resentment are specified as part of a single factor.

The results of these model comparisons are presented in Table 4. Since the four models are all nested, with complexity increasing from the one-factor model to the four-factor model, formal chi-square tests are possible. We also report some of the standard fit metrics employed in the structural equation modeling literature, such as the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Root Mean-Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). The results are unequivocal: across all samples, the four-factor model fits best.⁷ This result is supported not only by the formal chi-square tests, but also by the fit metrics. The lowest values of the RMSEA and SRMR metrics and the highest values of the CFI metric are obtained in the four-factor case.⁸

Our results show also that the one-dimensional factor model fits particularly poorly, with fit metrics that are weaker than typically stipulated as benchmarks. For example, the RMSEA for these models ranges from 0.14 to 0.17, which is somewhat in excess of threshold values such as 0.10 or 0.05 which are often used to distinguish adequate or good models. It therefore appears unreasonable to treat consciousness as a unidimensional construct. Neither does the simple two-factor model fit particularly well, as the RMSEA is greater than 0.10 in three samples, while the CFI falls below 0.90 in four samples. Finally, the hierarchical two-factor model tends to fit rather well, even if it falls somewhat short of four-factor model. For example, the CFIs exceed or closely approach the threshold value of 0.90, while the RMSEAs are lower than 0.10 in all cases. As such, in situations where simplicity is paramount, and four dimensions of consciousness thought excessive, we suggest that analysts may reasonably adopt the simpler hierarchical two-factor model.

5.2. Reliability

A second consideration is the reliability of our scales. Although CFA tests demonstrate that the four-dimensional conceptualization possesses the highest construct validity, the reliability of each dimension reveals the extent of measurement error. A scale with low reliability indicates a high level of measurement error, suggesting that the same individuals may provide different answers when the scale is administered at different times, or they might respond differently to various items related to the same dimension. This is particularly a concern for our resource and cultural resentment scales, which have only two and three items respectively. Table 5 shows the Cronbach’s alpha estimate of inter-item reliability for various identity and resentment scales across our five samples.

We generally find that our scales are reliable. The five-item identity scale and the six-item power resentment scales show alphas of greater than .80 in all samples, and within rural and urban sub-samples as

⁷ Since the same model is supported across all five samples, the battery demonstrates configural measurement invariance, i.e., the pattern of factor loadings is consistent across countries. However, more stringent forms of invariance – metric and scalar, which require consistent factor loadings and intercepts across groups – are not supported (see supplementary materials). This indicates that while the battery appears to consistently capture a four-factor model across national contexts, analysts should allow parameters to vary by country, as we have done in this analysis.

⁸ In the supplementary materials we show that the same result holds when we split each national sample into rural and urban subsamples.

Table 4
Tests of Dimensionality: CFA Models.

	Model statistic		Difference					
	χ^2	DF	χ^2	DF	p-val.	RMSEA	CFI	SRMR
Switzerland								
4-factor	615	98				.060	.956	.045
Hierarchical 2-factor	696	100	67	2	<.001	.064	.949	.057
2-factor	1256	103	347	3	<.001	.088	.900	.065
1-factor	4195	104	1301	1	<.001	.164	.650	.138
Germany								
4-factor	3106	98				.086	.912	.055
Hierarchical 2-factor	3596	100	237	2	<.001	.092	.898	.072
2-factor	5099	103	453	3	<.001	.109	.852	.079
1-factor	11 196	104	1250	1	<.001	.163	.668	.128
Spain								
4-factor	3386	98				.094	.900	.054
Hierarchical 2-factor	3581	100	154	2	<.001	.096	.895	.064
2-factor	5029	103	826	3	<.001	.113	.851	.073
1-factor	11 624	104	2101	1	<.001	.170	.657	.133
France								
4-factor	1512	98				.064	.955	.044
Hierarchical 2-factor	1577	100	16	2	<.001	.065	.953	.048
2-factor	3585	103	183	3	<.001	.103	.880	.061
1-factor	9507	104	318	1	<.001	.169	.672	.131
Britain								
4-factor	1158	98				.070	.929	.045
Hierarchical 2-factor	1538	100	203	2	<.001	.076	.914	.059
2-factor	2394	103	369	3	<.001	.089	.879	.065
1-factor	6255	104	1538	1	<.001	.135	.722	.099

Notes: The chi-square difference tests compare each sequential pair of models, with models ordered from most to least complex (i.e., lowest to highest degrees of freedom). The “robust” versions of the RMSEA and CFI indices are presented. CFI: Comparative Fit Index; RMSEA: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; SRMR: Standardized Root Mean Square Residual.

Table 5
Inter-item reliability estimates for scales in all samples.

Scale	Entire samples				
	CHE	DEU	ESP	FRA	GBR
Identity (5-item)	.87	.82	.85	.86	.83
Power resentment (6-item)	.89	.89	.88	.90	.85
Resource resentment (2-item)	.86	.88	.86	.88	.78
Cultural resentment (3-item)	.69	.71	.74	.83	.70
General resentment (11-item)	.91	.91	.91	.93	.89
Urban samples					
Scale	CHE	DEU	ESP	FRA	GBR
Identity (5-item)	.87	.82	.84	.86	.80
Power resentment (6-item)	.86	.86	.86	.88	.85
Resource resentment (2-item)	.83	.72	.72	.82	.69
Cultural resentment (3-item)	.68	.62	.66	.79	.65
General resentment (11-item)	.88	.86	.87	.90	.87
Rural samples					
Scale	CHE	DEU	ESP	FRA	GBR
Identity (5-item)	.86	.83	.86	.85	.83
Power resentment (6-item)	.90	.88	.83	.87	.84
Resource resentment (2-item)	.84	.83	.80	.81	.69
Cultural resentment (3-item)	.68	.70	.68	.77	.69
General resentment (11-item)	.91	.90	.87	.90	.88

Cell entries show Cronbach's alpha for the relevant scale and sample, based on pairwise Pearson's correlation matrices.

well. The shorter two-item resource resentment and three-item cultural resentment scales are less reliable, with alphas that drop below .70 in certain samples. These measures nevertheless remain adequately reliable for short scales, as alphas exceed .60. We also provide reliability estimates for a general resentment scale comprising all eleven resentment items should readers be interested in the more parsimonious two-factor model.

5.3. Patterns of place-based consciousness

Next, we consider how our four dimensions of consciousness are associated with major demographic and political variables in our five countries. We begin by analyzing the distributions of these dimensions by rural and urban areas (Fig. 1). A consistent difference can be observed across all five cases, i.e., urbanites exhibit less place-based consciousness than ruralites. This rural–urban gap is particularly pronounced when it comes to place-based resentments. The prevalence of rural resentment, which has been noted in the U.S. case by Cramer and Munis, clearly holds in our five European cases as well.

However, the four dimensions of consciousness vary in the extent to which their rural and urban distributions differ. There is generally a greater difference between ruralites and urbanites in the three dimensions of resentment than in their place-based identities.⁹ Indeed, in three cases (Germany, Spain, and France), ruralites exhibit in excess of a standard deviation more resource resentment than urbanites. There is also marked national variation in these rural–urban gaps. Switzerland has the smallest rural–urban resentment gap of our cases, with this generally being less than two-fifths of a standard deviation in magnitude.¹⁰ Spain, on the other hand, has the largest resentment gap of our five cases, with this being in excess of, or close to, a standard deviation in magnitude. These initial descriptive results therefore confirm existing understandings of rural–urban divides in Western democracies, but also highlight significant cross-national variation that has tended to be neglected in extant research.

We now turn to an examination of patterns of association between our four measures of consciousness and socio-political variables such as

⁹ All except one of these rural vs. urban differences are significant; the exception is rural vs urban identity in Switzerland.

¹⁰ Swiss exceptionalism on this point may be a result of it being a geographically small country in which few rural places are distant from urban places meaning that access to resources and services in rural areas is often better than in other contexts.

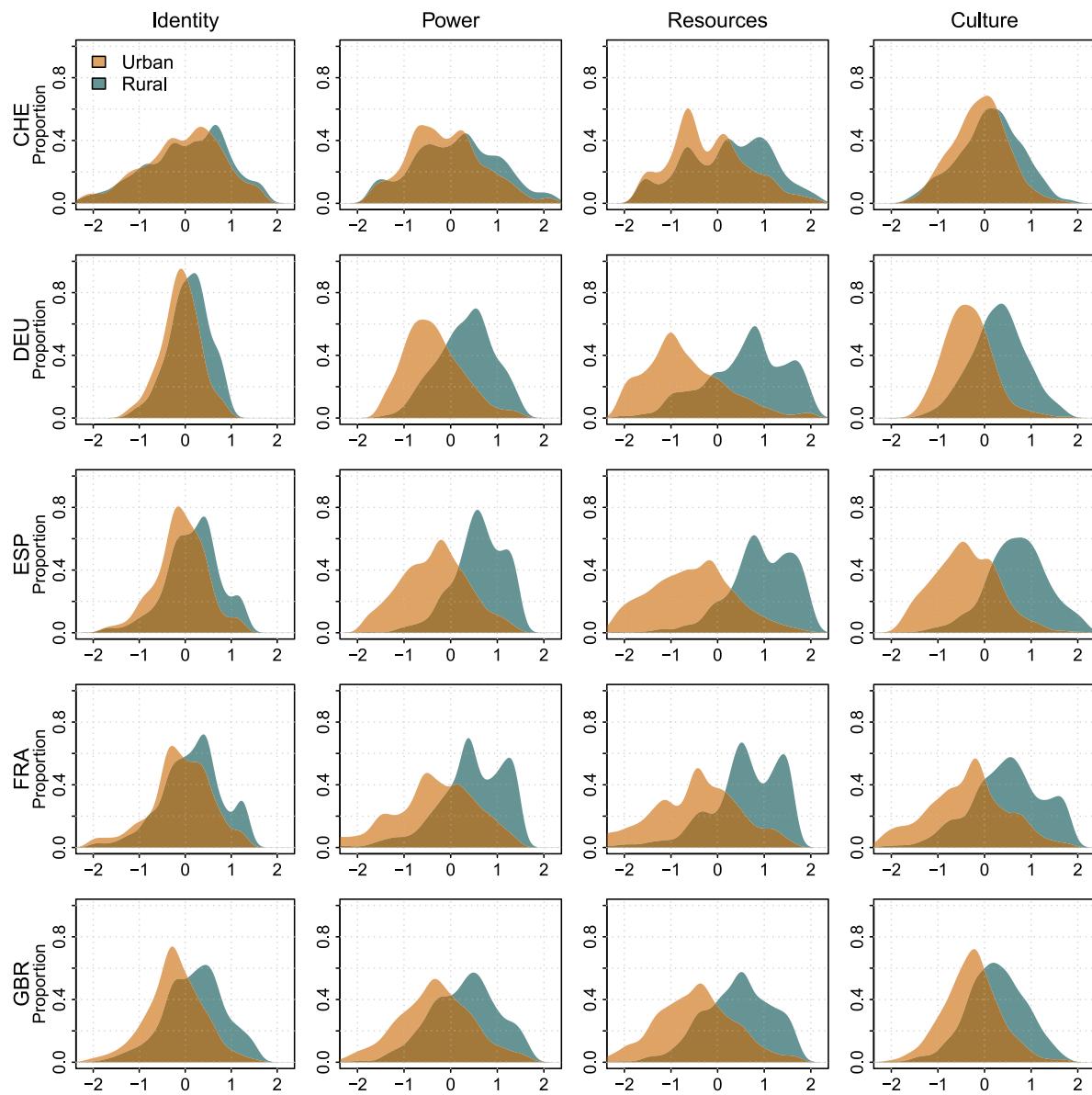


Fig. 1. Identity and resentments by country and urban and rural residence.

Notes: Each figure shows the density distributions of the respective dimension of place-based consciousness (in columns) by country (rows). Each consciousness measure is standardized to have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one; the more positive the score, the more the respondent exhibits the dimension in question. Urbanites are shown in brown and ruralites in blue. Estimates of the four dimensions of place-based resentment are obtained using the FIML 4-factor CFA, estimated separately in each national sample. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

income, education, and left-right self-placement. We accomplish this by extending our four-factor CFA model into a structural equation model (SEM), which allows measurement error in the four dimensions of consciousness to be included in downstream regression (or “structural”) models. We consider linkages between gender (female vs. other); education (holding a bachelor’s degree or not); income (upper, middle, lower tertile, and no response), age groups (18–34, 35–49, 50–64, and over 65), and a left-right self-placement scale (recoded to range from -1 to 1). We also include regional dummy variables in all models, although we do not report these effects.¹¹ As such, these analyses permit socio-political variables to have differing effects for ruralites and urbanites. Results are displayed in Fig. 2, with full tables of results included in the supplementary materials.

¹¹ In Switzerland, we use linguistic regions; in Germany, an East-West indicator; in France, the 13 regions; in Spain, the 17 autonomous regions; in Britain, the three nations.

Beginning with gender, we see little or no association with place-based consciousness. Age has a varying relationship with consciousness in our 10 (country by rural/urban) samples. In Germany, for example, age is associated with more resentment (particularly regarding power and resources), but only for urbanites. Indeed, older German ruralites have lower power and resource resentment than urbanites and younger ruralites. In France and Britain, by contrast, age is associated with lower urban resentment, but higher rural resentment, particularly cultural resentment. British ruralites tend to have acquire stronger place-based identities with age, as do Spanish urbanites. There are no clear effects of age in Switzerland.

The associations between income or education and place-based consciousness show clearer and more consistent patterns across our samples. There is either a negative or a neutral association between education and resentment. These effects of higher education can be seen across all varieties of resentment for urbanites in Germany, Spain, France, and Britain. They are also evident for ruralites in Germany and

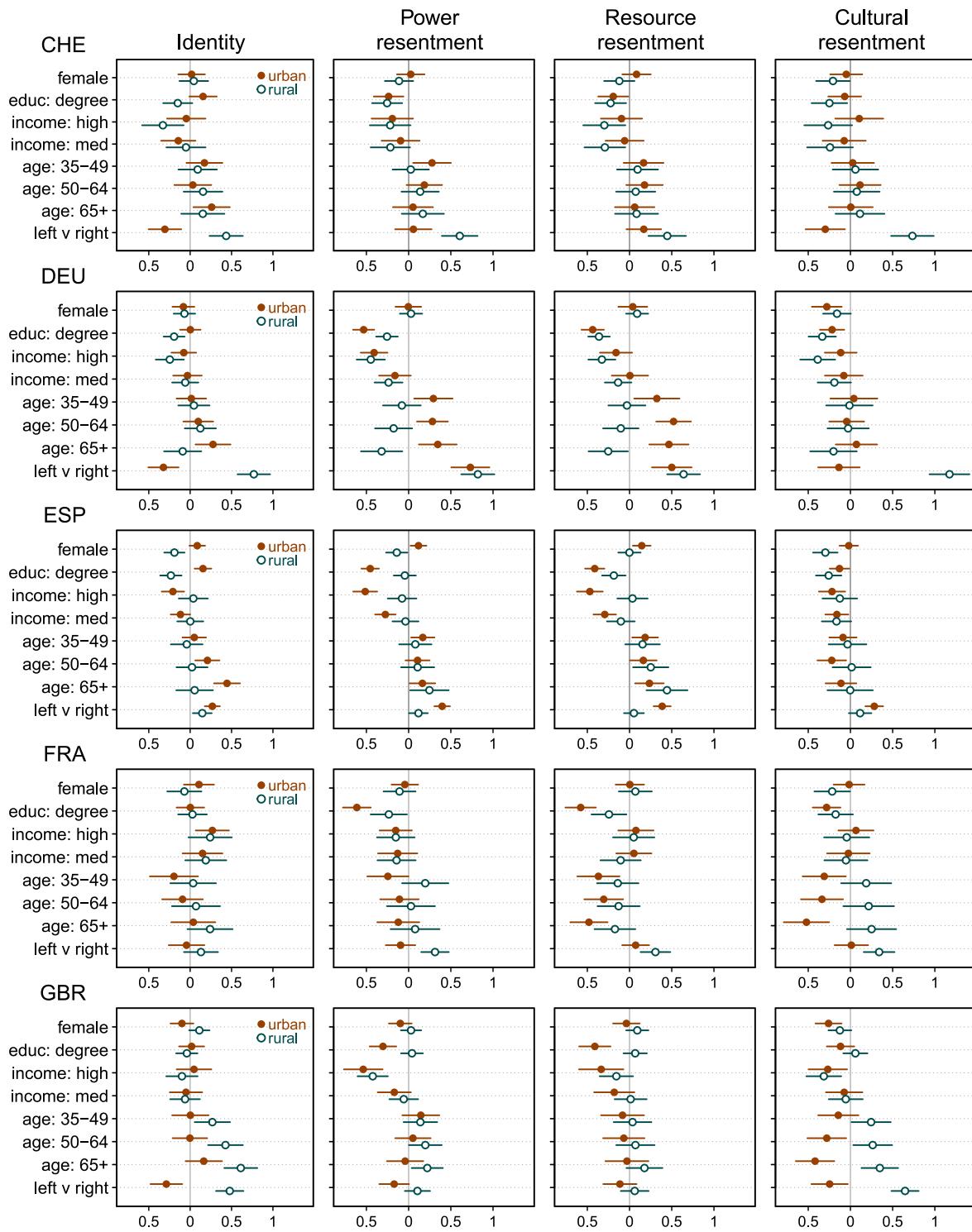


Fig. 2. Socio-political correlates of place-based identity and resentment.

Notes: The points show structural coefficients for the exogenous variables listed in rows on the endogenous latent variables listed in each column, with horizontal bars showing the 95% confidence intervals. Estimates are drawn from SEMs fit separately in each national urban or rural sample, i.e., 10 SEMs are fit in total.

Switzerland, and – to a lesser degree – Spain. Education has a more muted association with identity, with less-educated German and Spanish ruralites having weaker rural identities, and less-educated Spanish urbanites having stronger urban identities, than their university-educated peers.

A similar pattern is seen for income. Higher-income respondents typically display lower levels of resentment than low-income respondents (the omitted category and comparison group), although in many

instances there are no significant differences. However, there are no cases where higher earners are more resentful than lower earners. This pattern is seen among German ruralites (and to a lesser extent, urbanites), and among Spanish and British urbanites. There are no substantial or clear associations between income and consciousness in Switzerland and France.

These findings regarding income and education suggest a general pattern across our cases of a politics of being “left-behind”. To the

extent that there is a connection between rural or urban consciousness and measures of socio-economic status, it is always individuals without a degree or earning in the lowest tertile who express more place-based resentment, particularly power and resource resentment. Although extant research has focused primarily on rural “left behindness” and rural resentment, we find that urbanites with lower education and/or income also express place-based resentment, particularly in Spain and Britain. These results may suggest groups that have been left behind in modern service-based economies, whether rural or urban (see, e.g., [Jennings and Stoker, 2016](#)).

Nevertheless, arguably the most pronounced effects we observe in [Fig. 2](#) are those pertaining to the link between left-right identity and place-based consciousness. In Switzerland, Germany and Britain (and to a lesser degree, Spain), rural identity is strongly associated with right wing ideology, but not in France. In Switzerland, Germany, and France, we see that ruralites who identify with the political right are particularly likely to express all three varieties of rural resentment. In Britain, such effects are limited to the cultural form of resentment, where there is a positive association with right wing ideology. In Spain, although right wing ideology is associated with a rural identity it is not linked with any of the forms of rural resentment.

There are also interesting patterns of association between ideological identity and urban consciousness across our five cases. Mirroring their rural counterparts, Swiss, German, and British urbanites who identify as urbanites tend to lean to the left ideologically. In contrast, urban Spaniards who identify as such lean to the right. We see that the association between rightwing and urban identity in Spain also extends to urban resentment, as Spanish urbanites who express resentment of any kind tend to hold right wing identities. Similar results are seen among German urbanites, although only for power and resource resentment. In contrast, Swiss and British urbanites who express cultural resentment identify with the political left.

Whether among ruralites or urbanites, these associations between ideological identification and place-based consciousness are substantial. Since the left-right dimension remains an important orientating principle in European politics, our measures of consciousness allow insight into the resentments that accompany right-wing identity, even for lower socioeconomic status groups and individuals whose interests have traditionally been represented by the political left. The varying effects across the forms of resentment suggest also the merits of adopting the more nuanced three-component conceptualization of place-based resentment originally proposed by [Cramer \(2016\)](#).

5.4. Identifying a concise battery

The final step of our analysis is to identify a more concise battery of four items. The goal is to maximize construct validity by dropping items with weaker loadings while retaining coverage across all four theoretical components of place-based consciousness. A concise battery of this kind is likely to be useful for analysts as it requires less time in a survey.

We select a concise battery using two criteria. The first criterion is the highest minimum loading, i.e., selecting the item from each dimension that has the highest factor loading when considering the lowest loadings across all 10 samples. Essentially, for each dimension, we look at the item that, even at its weakest, still performs better than the weakest items of other dimensions. The second criterion is the highest average loading across the 10 samples.

The two methods produce similar results (see [Table 6](#)), with the same items selected for the three forms of resentment. These are ResIgnore, ResSpend, and ResRespect. Different identity items are selected according to the two criteria, with IdConnect having the highest minimum loading and IdCommon having the highest average loading. Either is an acceptable choice, depending on the specific needs of the analysis. As such, we suggest that ResIgnore, ResSpend, ResRespect, and either IdConnect or IdCommon form a satisfactory set of four items for researchers requiring a concise battery for measuring rural and urban consciousness in Europe.

Table 6
Selecting a concise battery.

Dimension	Highest minimum loading	Highest average loading
Identity	IdConnect (.63)	IdCommon (.78)
Power resentment	ResIgnore (.70)	ResIgnore (.83)
Resource resentment	ResSpend (.67)	ResSpend (.86)
Cultural resentment	ResRespect (.59)	ResRespect (.72)

Cell entries show the highest minimum or average loadings across the 10 national by rural vs urban samples. The four-factor FIML CFA models are used.

6. Conclusion

Spurred by a recognition that rural–urban divides are growing in political importance, we examine the concept of place-based consciousness across five European countries. In doing so, we develop batteries of measures of rural vs. urban identity and resentments in five languages. Our results demonstrate that these scales are reliable and valid within the five countries.

We find that rural and urban consciousness in Europe is best thought of as comprising an identity as a resident of rural or urban areas as well as three distinct forms of resentment relating to power, resources, and culture. Indeed, we find somewhat different patterns of association between the various dimensions of resentment and socio-political indicators. As such, our European findings depart from unidimensional treatments of place-based resentment proposed in previous work (e.g., [Borwein and Lucas, 2023; Munis, 2022](#)) and align more closely with [Cramer's \(2016\)](#) initial formulation.

We have shown that rural–urban consciousness has pronounced patterns of association with indicators of “left behind” status such as low income and lack of university education. At the same time, we find that rural consciousness is often linked with a right-wing identity. As such, our measures of place-based consciousness can help illuminate and explain political trends in Western Europe, such as how increasing levels of education have shifted political cleavages (e.g., [Ford and Jennings, 2020](#)).

By examining the concepts of rural and urban consciousness across multiple countries, we have demonstrated that sometimes dramatic national variations are evident in this phenomenon. The rural–urban gap in identity and resentment exists in all five cases, but is weakest in Switzerland and strongest in Spain. In addition, while we generally find that right-wing ruralites hold stronger rural identities and are more culturally resentful than left-wing ruralites, in Spain – in contrast – right vs. left identity does not correlate with identities or resentment in rural areas, but does so in urban areas. Moreover, while (low) education is linked with place-based resentment across all samples, the way that this interacts with the rural–urban divide varies across countries. In Germany, both ruralites and urbanites who lack a university education are more resentful, while in Spain, France, and Britain, the effect of low education on resentment manifests primarily among urbanites. These divergent findings underscore the need to examine consciousness in different settings.

While our findings provide significant insights into place-based consciousness across Western European countries, important limitations remain. First, the extent to which our measures generalize to other European contexts, particularly in Eastern Europe, warrants further investigation. Second, our measures aim to capture respondents' perceptions of rural or urban places generally but may not disentangle these from people's experiences of specific local milieus. Future research should explore how individual experiences in particular contexts shape rural and urban consciousness. Finally, while we establish a framework for measuring place-based consciousness and explore some socio-demographic correlates, the role of contextual factors – such as material deprivation, social isolation, and inequality – in shaping these perceptions remains uninvestigated. Investigating these environmental

conditions offers a promising avenue for deepening our understanding of rural and urban consciousness.

Considering the increasing salience of this topic of rural–urban political divides, we recommend that scholars of European politics include our items (either the full battery or the concise one if space is limited) to measure place-consciousness in survey research. Given that we find resentment to be three-dimensional, we recommend that scholars seek to include at least one measure of each dimension.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Christopher Claassen: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Sascha Göbel:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Antonia Lang:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kathrin Ackermann:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Petar Bankov:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Kevin Brookes:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Bartolomeo Cappellina:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Christopher Carman:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Markus Freitag:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Rubén García Del Horno:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Enrique Hernández:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Guillem Rico:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Sigrid Rossteutscher:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Richard Traunmüller:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Michael Webb:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Sonja Zmerli:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Alina Zumbrunn:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2025.102912>.

Data availability

The data and code are available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14960450>.

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